



BRAVE NEW WORLD

A CONVERSATION WITH DR. ROBERT CARET

By David Callahan

Photo by Bryan Burris

Over the last decade, the pace of change at Towson University has been truly remarkable, and for the last four years, the man with his foot on the accelerator is Dr. Robert Caret. Caret spent 21 years at Towson before leaving in 1995 to become president of San Jose State. He returned to Towson in 2003 and has been a driving force behind the rapid modernization of the school, the advancement of the curriculum offerings and the school's escalated community involvement. Caret began his academic career as a chemist and he appears not to have lost his touch for tinkering to find the right formulas.

For the last two years, Towson's masters program has been ranked among the top 50 public universities in the Northern region by *U.S. News and World Report* (full disclosure: I have an M.S. in writing from TU). The school now boasts a student population of more than 20,000 and has one of the most comprehensive wireless networks of any college campus in Maryland. The \$3.2 million network has proven so successful and so useful that Baltimore County is planning to expand the network into the entire Towson area and is contemplating taking the effort county-wide.

Much of this vision is due to Caret, a self-admitted "techie" who believes in the power of technology to transform communities. I sat down with Caret on July 30 to ask him about the changes at Towson and how technology is transforming his campus and what it means for America's future.



BRAIN SCAN reading the minds of Baltimore's leadership

SmartCEO: What has been the biggest challenge that you have discovered while in this job? What has been the biggest change that you have seen in the university?

Dr. Robert Caret: I think that the biggest challenge wasn't one that was surprising. The political climate around higher education in Maryland is the biggest challenge in the sense that because we're a small state and because of the way we have evolved – particularly in the public sector – we focus too little on a thing called entrepreneurship: capitalism and creative ideas and basically pulling

yourself up from your own bootstraps. We instead have all kinds of rules and regulations to protect institutions of government. I think that competition, in a positive way, is the only way to go. I knew that coming back because we had the same problem here when I was dean and vice president.

My belief is if we can offer a relatively low cost program – I'm not talking about medical schools, but rather about most other programs – and we can fill up classrooms with students who want to take the courses, then [the state] should let us do that. In this state, they try to force people into certain schools

to take specific programs. This isn't isolated; it happens with universities all over Maryland. We butt heads all the time over programs we want to offer.

There is a huge, huge need in hospitality management and construction management, for example, and we can't offer the programs because of the politics of the state. It's a backwards way of thinking and it's an old way of thinking. It's not a way to think when you are going through growth. So that has been the biggest challenge. Not only to overcome that, but to live with that. It's a frustrating thing. I was provost for almost nine years, and it would drive me crazy then and it still drives me crazy as president.

What I think has been the most exciting thing to happen has been to take Towson and put it in a position so that it could achieve the potential that everyone saw in it. That concerns the whole image. Then the other part of that is how do we become a "player" in this state? People are looking to us more and more for leadership, and I believe that in the last four years, we've taken significant strides. We used to call ourselves, "The Stealth University." Everyone loved us, supported us, but no one knew why exactly. You could also say that we were the Rodney Dangerfield school, "We don't get no respect."

That's no longer true. I believe that people are looking to us for leadership. We're close to a 20,000 student body and on track for 25(k). We have a very high quality student body, a very high quality experience on the campus. Take the 5,000 residential students for example. I think going from where we were and where we are and where we were going, it has been an exciting change, I think in a positive direction.

CEO: I've noticed among the business community of Baltimore that the Towson graduates represent a larger clan than they used to – especially within the 30-somethings. I know that you've made a special effort to go outside the academic community, especially in the business world, and get connected to the alumni. Is that starting to bear fruit in getting the alumni connected to the university?

RC: Absolutely. People used to compare us to Goucher. Well, we're five to 10 times the size of Goucher. So we had to get that reality out there. Part of that reality is the workforce and citizenship perspective. Eighty percent of our grad-

uates stay here. We're graduating 4,200 students, so you have more than 3,000 graduates going into the workforce in this area. We're probably the largest supplier of baccalaureate and master's candidates to the workforce in this state. College Park could be right there with us because of its size, but we are really a player in that role.

The other piece is that you are going to get more new companies coming out of a big research university like Johns Hopkins. That's always going to be the case. But 20 years down the road, a large number of the people running those companies are going to be coming out of Towson because of the numbers we put out. What we have tried to do to make that clearer to companies is to hold receptions where the CEO of a company and I will co-host the company alums. They're amazed to see the number of alums who actually show up. They are surprised to learn how many they actually have. Most companies don't usually track that.

When I first got back here, I was e-mailing a group of alums that I didn't know, one on one, saying that I just joined Hayfield's Country Club, I'm the new president, would you like to golf sometime? And a guy named Ray Brewster, he e-mailed back immediately. He ran HR for all of Black & Decker and he said, "Yeah, how about tomorrow?" So we have been golfing ever since and I asked him one day if he could give me a list of all Black & Decker employees that are Towson alums. He said yes and went back to the company and generated a list with 20 people on it, but he's not on the list. He realized that there must be something wrong with the database. What they found was, they weren't really tracking it. There were several hundred Towson alums internationally that work for Black & Decker.

CEO: What about students? I know about the apprentice program, but have you found other ways to link them more personally to the local business community?

RC: We're pushing that too. When I came back, we launched a strategic plan called 2010, which was based on four months of focus groups. But there's a certain zero sum game in organizations when you change the leader. The leader can give an organization direction and focus, but the organization itself doesn't change that much. So we went through all of the old strategic plans that were sit-



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ting on the shelf and took out the important parts of those and merged them with what we were hearing and launched a plan that had specific action items on it. It had five themes and 23 campus-wide goals and 86 very specific action items that were timeline oriented.

And in there, there were two things that relate to what you just asked. One was we wanted to double the number of internships. Every place I go, people love our interns and they want more. And the other one was to give every student who wanted it a service learning experience. Service learning is defined as being in the real world as part of your course experience. You might shadow someone in a job or you might be mentored by somebody in business. Either way, it is something with a course attached to it.

Those sort have come together at this point and our initiative has broadened. Because of the size of the student body, we can't offer the same experience for everyone, but we want all of our students to be involved outside of campus in some way, shape or form – whether it is as volunteers or formal interns or whatever. We've hired a new careers center director that will handle growing internships as much as possible. We're working closely with the departments who put up huge numbers of interns and who have done that somewhat autonomously over the years. We're pulling them in and asking, "If we wanted to double our amount of interns, what would we do to achieve that?"

So we're really overtly looking at it and that's beginning to move. We have about 1,500 interns out there every year. The goal is to take that number up until we double it.

On the service learning side, there's something around 3,100 students involved in those types of experiences. That is all part of the agenda that relates to us connecting to the real world and can relate to a similar agenda item that I would call sitting engagement. All of those are coming together quite nicely. We also have voting campaigns, have a deal with the *New York Times* where they have speakers coming in, we give students study materials, we try to make them knowledgeable about things that are going on in the world around them.

CEO: One of the typical problems with internships is communication between the school and the company, which is to

say, there usually isn't enough, if any. When we have an intern come in, particularly if its unpaid, I'm always careful to try and figure out what the intern needs to help move his or her learning along, but I always find myself wishing there were better communication with the school to learn how we can blend our needs and the student's needs and the school's expectations to create a situation where we know everybody wins. Sometimes students get the short end of the stick on internships and when they do, it's typically due to poor communication up front.

RC: I agree with you. It's real challenging because of the numbers. And that's part of this gearing up to handle it. You've got to staff it, especially if it's a formal internship, because then they're getting a grade. If it's just a volunteer or a student working part-time as some sort of co-op program, then it's easier because it achieves different things. But I agree with you and that's all part of what we're looking at in terms of the resources needed to make it work. I think there are a lot of companies like yours that gain from having the interns, but also want the interns to gain. It's not just the job or the money, but what experience they gain from that role. Northeastern University for years has had a program where they literally have every student working. So 21,000 would be working and 21,000 would be going to school and six months later they would swap. So, the company had a full-time employee who was a Northeastern student, but they just came in six-month increments. It's a 100 percent co-op program. The students graduate in five years and they pay their way through college that way. It's a very nice model and we're looking at that kind of model. Not for the whole campus, because it won't work for the whole campus, but we might take majors that are large majors and do the same kind of thing. The biggest internship programs tend to be mass-communications, business and computer science. But I think it's a win-win for everybody, it really is.

CEO: I hear that you have a deep and abiding interest in technology and where it can take the university. I took a look at your blog. I think it's interesting that you are writing one. The funny thing about technology is that it seems to progress in fits and starts. Some things work and others are just distractions.

So, I'm curious what you see as the really promising technologies that will move the school to a better future.

RC: We have been somewhat slow there. Not by intention, just by natural inclination. We didn't make an overt decision to be slow, but we were slower at jumping into the online education field. When I was provost, we were getting into it pretty heavily. But in the nine years I was gone, it didn't progress very far. So when I came back, I found that we had about 900 courses that were Web-enhanced, but relatively few courses that were 100 percent online. I don't think that every course in the world on every campus needs to be offered online, but there are students and courses where that match is good and we now have six programs online, all of which are doing very well.

I think the online world, as technology gets better, is going to be a bigger piece of the puzzle. There are predictions now that about 20 percent of the credit dollars for the whole country are now generated online. The students are using it both for an enhanced user experience and also for time management.

As bandwidth gets bigger and you

can do more creative things, you are going to see more exciting ways to achieve learning. Second Life brings teaching to an artificial world. Teachers are using podcasts to help students that want to re-listen to lectures. All of these things are doable and, more importantly, they are becoming affordable to do on a routine basis.

I've always been a techie. I bought my first computer in 1981 and I feel at home with technology and I think the same is true for this generation coming up through school right now.

In terms of administration, we're trying to use these tools also. Instead of spending hours in senate meetings discussing [some educational issue], why not throw it into an online chat room for six months? Let anybody who wants to discuss it place their thoughts in there over six months and then call a meeting to hash out the final details. We can get things accomplished much more effectively, without necessarily sitting in a room together. Little things like that add up.

Probably my favorite productivity device is electronic to-do lists. I've used probably seven different versions of that over the last 25 years or so and it really

helps. I was having dinner in Easton last Saturday night with two donors and somebody walked in who I recognized, but I couldn't quite remember the name. I pulled out my Palm Pilot and clicked in the company and walked over and said, "Hi Don, how are you doing? How's your wife, Jen?" There are thousands of pieces of information that I can't keep all in my head, but I can keep it in my Palm Pilot. It takes time to master and to maintain, but the productivity gains can be great.

And finally, there is the communication piece. You mentioned my blog. Well, how should I deal with communicating with 20,000 students? That blog averages 1,000 people a month. That's a lot more people I can touch, so it's worth a few hours of work every week.

CEO: I imagine a blog is good because it gives a student another way to approach you. They say, "Oh, I read what you wrote."

RC: Yes it does. As a CEO type, I believe there has to be a certain distance between you and the people you make decisions about when necessary. But I

also believe that it's very possible to be personal and to be yourself most of the time. As long as you make it clear that when you need to set those boundaries, you can do so. We intentionally named it Bob's Blog, because I wanted the students to think of me as "Bob," not as some kind of iconic president sitting up in an office gazing down. I find that it helps. When I walk across the campus, students are very comfortable talking to me.

Facebook is even more interesting. I've been doing R&D on Facebook to see how you control it. It can get so big so fast that you spend your whole life just trying to communicate. But I joined without telling anyone and they immediately started finding me. All these students started wanting to be my friend on Facebook. I let a few of them in. The ones I knew.

CEO: Is there a dark side to that social networking technology? It seems to me it can create this permanent record of associations that are fleeting. I'm not sure I'd want my existence from 20 years ago so thoroughly documented.

RC: Well that's the trick. There is a dan-

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ger. There was a president recently who lost their job because of a blog. They used the blog to take her down. But you can't live in that kind of fear, so what we've done is asked how can we control it? And this is why the blog is not interactive. When people contact us, we acknowledge them. But if I'm not going to take your phone call, I'm not going to answer your e-mail either. If I feel it should be followed through, I'll have someone do that.

CEO: To some extent, students expect to be connected to the administration of their college today. When the Virginia Tech shooting occurred, the thing that I was amazed about was the expectation that the students had about instant communication.

RC: I know. I knew immediately that the [Virginia Tech] president was in trouble because it was almost as if no matter what he does, he's in trouble. The tendency is to overreact, as I believe they did in the Duke case. You have to take strong action when things happen. If a kid badly beats up another kid, he needs to get banned from campus. But by the same token, you need to know that you have good information before you take any action. And unfortunately, in the case of Virginia Tech, things unfolded very quickly and information was mixed. What the president knew and what the chief of police knew wasn't always in synch right away.

I spoke immediately to my police chief and I said, "OK, if the same thing happens here, do we immediately shut down campus?"

He said, "It depends." If somebody, for instance gets shot on the street in front of this building, do you shut down the whole campus? Probably not. You don't know if the shooter is still around and it may have had nothing to do with the campus. I think the president of Virginia Tech has actually come out looking quite good in hindsight. But it's a very difficult situation. I mean, just dealing with snowstorms is difficult. That decision to shut down is a no-win situation.

CEO: I wouldn't have expected Virginia Tech to have every student's e-mail at their fingertips.

RC: Right. We've been looking at that. The problem is that even if you have them, with 20,000 students, it could take three hours for the e-mails to get

out. The servers just can't send that fast. They don't all go at once.

So what most campuses are doing, including us, is creating a siren system that uses a private company and text messaging, which can go out almost instantaneously. It alerts people to check the Web and their radios and once you do that, you can communicate with 25,000 people pretty quickly.

But, you are right, the expectation is there and even with the "helicopter parents," as we call them. The parents will call you up. I was just speaking with Jordan Wertlieb, the president of WBAL, and he was telling me that a

CEO: What about video cameras? The technology of cameras has gotten so cheap and so has the ability to store the footage. It's possible to wire the whole place, especially something like a campus. But there's that Big Brother element to this that is very scary.

RC: It's a constant tug of war. We have 70 cameras on campus. Just the other day they caught a guy downtown who had mugged somebody and they caught him because of the video camera. It's great they caught him, but by the same token, do you want them watching you all the time? It's a real tug of war

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student came in and interviewed and after the student went home, the student's mother called him up. She asked him if there was anything her son could have done differently or if there was anything he should do after-the-fact because he'd really like to get the job. Jordan is saying to himself, "I don't want to be dealing with this kid's mother. What's going on here?"

We're all in that situation. There is an expectation today that campuses act like parents. "In loco parentis" allegedly died in the 1950s. The courts have held that campuses can't be responsible for ensuring that students don't ever get drunk, for example, but there is a fine line we walk between expectations, sometimes unrealistic, and reality.

One thing that we can't do by law is mail grades to parents unless the student signs a waiver. We counsel parents, "Hey, if you're paying and you really want this, have your child sign the waiver before you sign the check. Then you'll know. But don't call us up after the fact."

So we have legal boundaries around us that really hurt in the Virginia Tech case and we're all now looking at how to break those down into common sense rules that will allow us not to invade privacy, but to also protect society.

between public safety and public good and independence. You are right – they are going to be seeing things they have no right to see.

This is happening [in traffic enforcement] with red light cameras. Now they want to put two cameras on the road that take a picture when you pass the first camera and then again when you pass the second. Velocity equals distance divided by time and they send you a ticket. No human being involved. So yeah, you were speeding and breaking the law, but there are a lot of things that you do that you don't want to be sanctioned for. Where do we draw the line on where robotics can be used to sanction us?

You're right to bring up 1984. It can be scary. I do believe in monitoring certain public areas, but it's a very fine line and the technology is gaining. It can really be quite frightening. With GPS in a phone, they can track you as an individual now. There is spyware you can buy that allows people to grab control of a phone even when it's off and allows people to record you. There is a bad side to tech. It's not all good news.

CEO: Thanks very much.

CEO